

MEDICAL PRACTICE

Medical History

Cleopatra's needle: Dermatology's weightiest achievement

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Attached to the stone plinth of Cleopatra's needle on the Thames Embankment is a vast metal plaque on which is engraved *en creux* the name of Erasmus Wilson MD FRS (fig 1). And what a colourful character was Sir Erasmus! A medical giant who documented many skin diseases, pityriasis versicolor and others, while attempting to persuade the profession not to diagnose them all as syphilis but who himself seems to have fallen frequently into just this trap, to judge from the magnificent colour plates in his celebrated sumptuous volume.¹ Compassionate in his work as a physician, generous in the dissipation of his fortune for charity, and romantic in his vision—but not just a dreamer; he became the first President of the Egypt Exploration Fund. And through this, like many before him, he became ensnared by Cleopatra.

Erect for a thousand years and longer at Heliopolis (near Cairo Airport), a witness to the power of the Heavens and the secular strength of Pharaohs, Cleopatra's needle was quarried and fashioned as a single shaft from the granite hills of Assouan, a prodigious precision task accomplished three and a half millennia ago. With its fellow, for "needles" were always put up in pairs, it had been drifted down the Nile, several hundred miles from its birthplace. Then more upheavals when the Ptolemies dragged and floated both of the obelisks from Egypt's erstwhile centre of power to the world's now greatest city, Alexandria. There the two were upraised once again and took their stance before the immense palace complex, neighbours of the "noblest library that had ever existed," where they were to be seen, when he stormed and occupied the palace, by Caesar "to whom arrived wrapped in carpets Cleopatra." They watched over

THROUGH THE PATRIOTIC ZEAL OF
ERASMUS WILSON F.R.S.
THIS OBELISK
WAS BROUGHT FROM ALEXANDRIA
ENCASED IN AN IRON CYLINDER
IT WAS ABANDONED DURING A STORM
IN THE BAY OF BISCAY
RECOVERED AND ERECTED
ON THIS SPOT BY
JOHN DIXON C.E.
IN THE 42ND YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
QUEEN VICTORIA
1878

FIG 1—Plaque attached to stone plinth of Cleopatra's needle.

Anthony when later he reigned "while Cleopatra bore him children and built to him the Temple of Caesareum, flanked by the two ancient obelisks" as Rose Macaulay says. *Baedeker* (1908) puts it more bluntly "Caesar was afterwards conquered by the charm of the Egyptian Queen, but Anthony fell more fatally into her toils and spent years of revelry with her (41-30BC)." Of this palace there remains only the whispering ghosts, and the site is now built over. Earlier its substance was pillaged as a treasure store of dressed stone by the locals, while in the sand close by, ignominiously thrown down now, our needle was to lie for another millennium, too massive to be commandeered as building material but profanely mutilated by having had three or four feet cleft from its butt-end. The other needle, sadly deprived of its mate, is to be found undefiled and 70 feet tall, today, in Central Park, New York.

Inspected by tourists like Napoleon, coveted by General Abercromby as an object to boost national prestige rather than Egyptological science, London's needle was presented, not stolen, to Britain in 1819 to glorify the English-Turkish

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victory, particularly Nelson's over the French; indeed not simply donated by Egypt's new ruler Mahommed Ali, he had even offered to underwrite the cost of its transport to the coast and loading on shipboard. Ironically previously the Viceroy had been Napoleon's puppet.

But the giant obelisk still wallowed prostrate in the sand for 60 years more (fig 2) because of parsimonious English government panjandrums and languid public opinion. (Thackeray is said to have suggested, moreover, that the Trafalgar Square pillar be given to the Egyptians and should join the obelisk so that both of the huge ugly monsters could lie in the dirt side by side.)

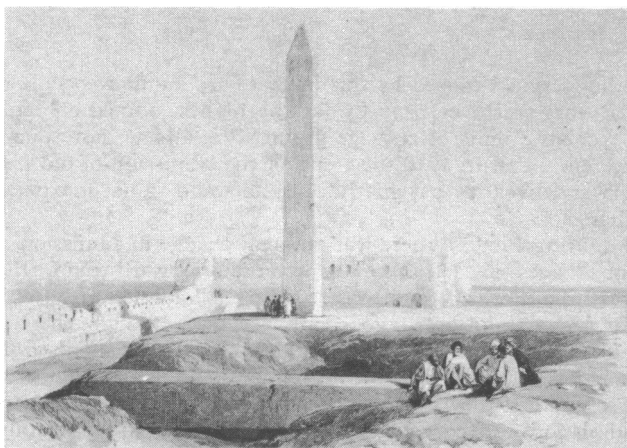


FIG 2—"Obelisk at Alexandria, commonly called Cleopatra's needle." David Roberts, RA (1846), a plate from *Egypt and the Holy Land*. Some locals are squatting on London's obelisk.

Erasmus Wilson in 1877 offered to sponsor its removal to London. The cost was a colossal £10 000, the same sum as he had given to support a chair in pathology and double that with which he had created the chair in dermatology and then personally had occupied at the Royal College of Surgeons of England. This was a time when the top consultants charged a fee of one guinea (£1.05).

The story of the needle's removal from Egyptian soil to our coast was recounted recently by Williams²—"So it was wrapped up in a metal case, with two sails, a rudder and a superstructure for a crew of three and set off in September 1877, towed by the tug Olga. The tow rope broke in a gale, six lives were lost from the crew of the Olga, and the venture was abandoned. Three months later the needle was found in good shape and arrived in London on January 20, 1878."

Elaborate engineering apparatus (fig 3) allowed the 193-ton monolith to be elevated above its pedestal and then in just three-quarters of an hour swung into the vertical, these final manoeuvres being watched by Professor Wilson and other notables from a steamer he had chartered and had had moored off the Embankment. The "Union Jack" and the Turkish Ensign were run up at 4 o'clock in the afternoon "in token of the success of the work." Telegrams congratulating Wilson and Dixon, the civil engineer, were received from the Queen at Balmoral and the Khedive of Egypt.

Enclosed within the core of the obelisk's metal supports in two large earthenware jars were deposited a number of curious and apparently haphazardly selected objects, save anything dermatological, given by various persons and firms.

Among the diverse assembly were: Dr Birch's translation of the obelisk's hieroglyphics, Bradshaw's railway guide, case of cigars, box of hairpins, a shilling razor, sundry articles of female adornment, baby's feeding bottle, and photographs of a dozen pretty Englishwomen (donated by a gallant!).

How shall we celebrate the centenary of the rescue of London's elegant obelisk from its undignified former state and migration

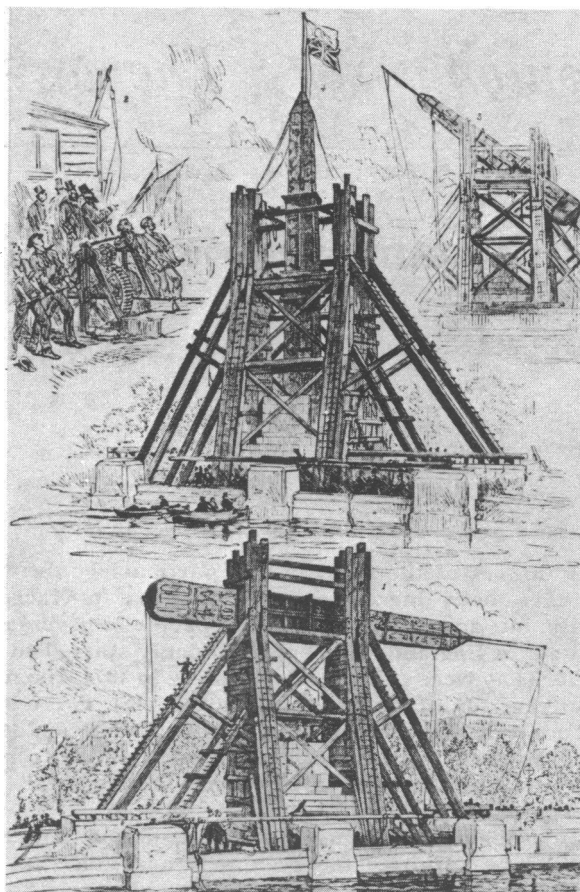


FIG 3—Sequences in the final erection of Cleopatra's needle on the Victoria Thames Embankment, opposite Adelphi Terrace, Thursday, 12 September 1878. *Illustrated London News*, 1878, 73, 286.

to its final resting place after thousands of years of journeyings and neglects, the culmination of the whims of many great men? But in the expanse of time how permanent is a century? Perhaps it is this thought that urges me to exhort you to haste not with panegyrics but plan for commemorative jollities.

References

- ¹ Wilson, E, *Portraits of Diseases of the Skin*. London, Churchill, 1855.
- ² Williams, D I, *Archives of Dermatology*, 1976, **112**, 1654.

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WORDS The word DRUG is undergoing a change of meaning. Until the middle 1960s drug meant a pharmacologically active medicinal substance. Only in special context did it denote a substance that affects mood and thinking, with the attendant risk of addiction. Drug is now generally understood by the laity in the latter sense, and is, alas, fast becoming a dirty word. Even the Committee on Safety of Drugs has been renamed the Committee on Safety of Medicines. It was an eminently usable word in clinical practice; monosyllabic, four-lettered, clear, and to the point. Nowadays one hesitates to ask a patient, "What drugs are you taking?" for fear of being misunderstood. Medicines can be taken, especially by older patients, to mean fluids—for example, two teaspoonfuls after meals. So instead one takes a deep breath and says, "What medicines, tablets, or capsules are you taking, or—er—sprays—ahem—suppositories, or, excuse me—pessaries?" "None of these, doctor." (I knew I'd forgotten something.) "I'm on injections." The present trend is a reversion to earlier times when the use of drug could optionally imply narcotic effect. "I have drugg'd their possets" (*Macbeth*, ii, 2, 7).